

THE LIBRARY AND THE BLIND

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HOUSE FOR THE BLIND**



# The Library And The Blind

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THE RELATIONSHIP between the librarian for the blind and her reading public more than any other with which I am acquainted—and I have worked in other library fields—is a source of satisfaction to those engaged in it. We librarians for the blind not only try to provide reading materials requested by our readers, but we try to become acquainted with our borrowers through their correspondence. The relationship thus established is a close one, and each borrower becomes to the librarian an individual, with his own likes and dislikes. We often hear of his successes and his misfortunes and become, in some degree, participants in his life. For example, a letter was received by the California State Library a short time ago from a foreign-born reader who had been studying to take the examination for citizenship. He proudly announced that he had just passed his examination successfully and was now a full-fledged citizen of the United States. His expressed appreciation for the help the Library had given him naturally pleased us as librarians, while his success in the examination delighted us as friends.

I am sure that I speak for all librarians in this field when I say that we not only count our readers as active borrowers but also as active friends. Of course, I do not mean to imply that misunderstandings may not arise, for in those fields in which communication is carried on wholly or largely by the written word, ambiguities and complete failures to communicate are not unknown. Often in our writing we reveal things we did not intend, and fail to say the things we meant. No doubt everyone of you has experienced such phenomena both as reader and as writer. The misunderstandings between the librarian and the blind reader are, however, relatively few, and the relationship is usually a pleasant one of understanding and service. In addition, may I say that I know of no borrowing clientele which is as conscientious as ours. Just as the readers trust us to give them the best service within our powers, so we trust them to return the books in good condition. And our trust is not misplaced. No library for the blind in the United States charges fines for overdue books, and very few find it necessary to penalize for mutilation of books. This situation can exist only as long as trust is well founded, as I sincerely believe it always will be.

In order that you may understand the usefulness of the forthcoming *Handbook on Library Work with the Blind*, it will be necessary to describe some of the typical tasks undertaken in a library for the blind. Of first importance is the exchange of books. In almost all these libraries whenever a book is returned by a

borrower, another is automatically sent in its place. The magnitude of this task is apparent in the circulation reports of any large library for the blind: for example, in the California State Library approximately 3,264 book exchanges are made each month. In a large public library such a monthly circulation would not be startling, but in a library for the blind it is a large figure, since it covers a kind of reference and readers' advisory service, as well as the simple filling of requests. Further complicating this task, about a third of the 3,264 exchanges are Talking Books. With a collection of only 280 different Talking Book containers not counting duplicates, and with approximately 600 borrowers clamoring for them, the difficulties involved in these exchanges are obvious. In addition, each box of Talking Book records when it is returned by a borrower must be carefully examined for missing or damaged records before it can be sent out again.

Another typical task is dealing with correspondence. In the California State Library eighty postal cards and seventy letters are received in an average week, many of which require answers and all of which demand careful attention and discrimination in interpretation. Roughly a half of this correspondence consists of individual requests and lists of books desired. These, together with requests for Talking Book machines, can be quickly dealt with, but the remainder of the letters and cards usually demands more attention. The requests range from the trivial to the tragic. We are asked in one letter to lend our influence to an entirely logical but impractical spelling reform in which all the *wh's* in the English language will become *hw's*, so that *which* and *who* would be spelled *hwich* and *hwo*. In another letter we will be urgently requested to provide a cure for the profound apathy of a newly blind adult. Between these extremes fall requests for prices of writing appliances, for descriptions of the various embossed types, for reading lists of books available on specific subjects, or for help in writing a speech.

A typical task which is a pleasure to the librarian interested in her borrowers is the daily selection of titles to be sent to those readers who rely upon her to keep them supplied with books they will enjoy. Naturally there must be some criteria in selecting books for a borrower. What seems interesting to the librarian may be dull for the reader; therefore she must select for him not according to her own reading interests but according to his. Her aids in this task are the record of what he has read in the past and his correspondence, which may tell what type of books he has enjoyed. There is



no greater satisfaction to a librarian for the blind than to receive a letter from a borrower, whether an insatiable reader of mystery stories or a student of history, showing that he has been pleased with her selections.

The tasks I have enumerated are typical of nearly all libraries for the blind, but they are by no means all of the duties for which many of us are responsible. I have not mentioned the cataloging and processing of embossed books and Talking Books as typical tasks as in some libraries those duties are undertaken by other departments. Such work, however, wherever it is done is primarily the concern of the books for the blind department since cataloging and processing of books for the blind differ in many respects from that for ink print books. The cataloging of books for the blind will be much briefer, as bibliographic notes and supernumerary subject heading are unnecessary when the card catalog is to be used only by the librarian. Besides the author card, a title card and one or two subject cards are usually considered adequate. The processing for circulation of books for the blind may be abbreviated as a book pocket is not essential, and a classification number need not be used, although many libraries for the blind find it desirable to classify. There are only two steps necessary in processing books for circulation—imposing a mark of ownership in each book, and giving each a number differentiating it from all other volumes in the collection.

Of the twenty-seven depository libraries receiving books and Talking Books through the Library of Congress, four also distribute Talking Book machines. This process involves: sending out application and agreement forms to applicants, checking signed agreements and forwarding a copy to the Library of Congress, sending machines to approved applicants, notifying the Library of Congress of machines shipped and of any changes in address, replacing defective parts, recalling machines not in use, notifying Library of Congress of returned machines, and filing the multifarious blanks, forms and correspondence. When a distributing agency has over 700 machines in the field, the vast amount of paper work entailed is evident.

I have sketched some of the tasks of a library for the blind so that you may understand what is implied when I speak of the routines employed by these libraries. A systematic scheme for carrying out each of the tasks mentioned must be established, if the library is to be efficient and give good service. Libraries for the seeing have long ago established the superiority of certain routines in their field, and these are taught in all library schools. Standardization has been the result of the study of the various techniques, the most efficient being finally adopted by the group as a whole. For example, one can cite the adoption of Library of Congress catalog cards by a majority of libraries for the seeing, the use of the Dewey or Library of Congress classification systems, the use of Library of Congress subject headings, and rules

for filing a dictionary catalog. In these practices and in many others, libraries for the seeing have worked together for the improvement of their service. The library for the blind, however, has problems peculiar to itself. Insofar as the type of service and the mode of service differ from those of the public library, the standardized techniques, the routines of the public library, will not apply.

Since libraries for the blind were first organized, the librarian in charge of each library has had to rely on her own intelligence to work out routines, or else she has had to adopt those of a neighboring library. We have each made our own mistakes, and each has corrected her mistakes in her own way. Our only help is the annual discussion of problems and techniques at the American Library Association Round Table on Work with the Blind. These discussions have been of real profit only to those few librarians who have attended, although a brief account of the points covered at these meetings is published in the American Library Association *Proceedings* each year. One can thus find statements of the problems in library work with the blind, but one can nowhere find a complete exposition of the practices and routines followed by the various libraries for the blind in the United States.

What we need, then, is some means of comparing our routines with those of other libraries in our field, and of estimating the relative effectiveness of the various possible ways of doing the necessary tasks. All of us want to give better, more efficient service to our public, and the lack of a definitive survey of the methods actually in use is a manifest handicap.

Not only do we who are now engaged in this work need a measuring stick by which to judge our routines, but those who wish to fit themselves to take our places need a book in which all the available facts about this work are recorded. A student in librarianship may thoroughly train herself in cataloging, classification, reference work, and administration, but what can she study to become a librarian for the blind? She can learn of the causes and prevention of blindness, of the economic conditions of the blind, and of the history of the movement for the blind by reading *Blindness and the Blind in the United States* by Dr. Harry Best (Macmillan, 1934). She can learn about the history of education of the blind in Dr. Richard French's *From Homer to Helen Keller* (American Foundation for the Blind, 1932). *What of the Blind* edited by Helga Lende (American Foundation for the Blind, 1938) will provide her with information on the education, the psychology, the social adjustment, and the recreation of the blind. She can acquire a working knowledge of agencies for the blind by studying the *Directory of Activities for the Blind in the United States and Canada* compiled by Ruth Elizabeth Wilcox and Helga Lende (2nd edition, American Foundation for the Blind,



1938). There are many other excellent sources about all aspects of work with the blind except library work, by which I mean the actual carrying out of the duties involved—cataloging books, circulating books, giving reference aid, and so on. There is one little book which I should not fail to mention, since it is thus far the first and last step toward an independent presentation of library work with the blind. I mean Mary C. Chamberlain's *Library Work with the Blind*, a seven-page pamphlet published by the American Library Association in 1915 and revised in 1930. Miss Chamberlain's book will give the recruit to this field a brief introduction to the library problems peculiar to it, but still she will not know of the various routines possible in discharging effectively the duties of librarian for the blind.

A plan for writing a book of the sort needed was first considered by Mrs. Martha K. Stark, Branch Librarian of Wolfner Memorial Library for the Blind, St. Louis, Missouri. She writes:

In the first three years that I was Chairman of the A.L.A. Committee there were innumerable questions sent me for answer by the A.L.A. of the type that would be covered well in any good Handbook on work with the blind. . . . When the A.L.A. wrote me that there was some money in an old fund . . . that was the first project that came to my mind; so I wrote each of the Committee members to see how they would feel about it. . . . We began to send out letters and to draft the tentative outline which I presented to the Round Table as a whole, at the Kansas City Conference in 1938.

Mrs. Stark turned this work over to me in the fall of 1938, when I became Chairman of the American Library Association Committee on Work with the Blind. After reading the many letters from librarians to whom Mrs. Stark had sent the outline, the variety of routines employed by the different libraries became still more apparent.

Now that a tentative outline had been adopted by the Committee and by those attending the Kansas City Conference in 1938, the next step was to decide how the writing of the book was to be handled. Three different methods of approach were possible. First, the book might be written as a theoretical discussion of the various aspects of library work with the blind, with anecdotes illustrating the difference between our work and that of librarians for the seeing public. A book of this sort would, however, be of little value to librarians, since it would contain the type of material with which we are all very familiar.

Another possible method of presentation would be an historical discussion of the development of libraries for the blind; this would, of course, be a real contribution to literature about the blind and about libraries, but still it is not what is most needed at present. What we wanted to produce was a working tool for librarians, a *Handbook of Library Work with the Blind*, with all that the word "handbook" implies.

The committee finally agreed with me on a new ap-

proach, one which would be as securely rooted in fact as the historical survey would have been, and yet one which would provide real assistance to librarians. We would, in the text, discuss at length the various techniques and routines actually in use in libraries for the blind in the United States, at the same time attempting to evaluate the relative efficiency of the different practices.

If the book, then, was to be a factual exposition of the details of our work, we had first to know how each of the libraries carried out their various tasks. To provide us with this information, a lengthy questionnaire was compiled, mimeographed, and sent to each of the librarians of the twenty-seven libraries receiving material through the Library of Congress, and to six other large libraries, one of which was the Canadian Institute for the Blind. These librarians were asked to submit samples of their catalog cards, application cards, labels, and other forms, so that there might be no misunderstanding about their methods of carrying out their tasks. All librarians to whom the questionnaire was sent responded quickly and generously, and many of them wrote kind letters of encouragement, offering further assistance should we need it.

I have sketched for you the history of the *Handbook* and given some idea of the method which is being employed in compiling it. The Committee is now engaged in assembling and interpreting the mass of material it has collected and hopes to have the work finished within a year.

The immediate value of a well-written and accurately-documented *Handbook on Library Work With the Blind* would be to give librarians in this field a means of comparing their routines with those used in other libraries for the blind. If it serves no other purpose than to suggest the relative importance and effectiveness of the various necessary routines, it will have been a worth while project, since we often find ourselves overcomplicating some one phase of our work to the detriment of other phases. For instance, our system of charging books may be quite involved in order to preclude any possibility of sending a title twice to the same borrower, and in the same library we may overlook the need for a simple subject catalog which would save us hours of time in selecting books for borrowers who are interested in very limited subject fields. If we can judge each of our routines according to its true value to us and to our borrowers, we may find that we will need to give more time to reference aid and readers' advisory service.

As I have said, the immediate purpose of the book is to help the librarian, but we also hope it will be a reliable source of information for anyone wanting to learn about our work. The ultimate and most important purpose of the book is to improve library service to the blind readers of the United States.

# Open House For The Staff

CORDELIA CURTIS

Reference Librarian, Newark, N. J., Public Library<sup>1</sup>

To THE STAFF of the Newark Public Library, Election Day 1939 meant not only a holiday for the privilege of voting, but it also meant that for the first time the Library was to be open to the staff alone, for the staff to visit, show off, enjoy, and appreciate.

The President of the Staff Association, fired by the San Diego story,<sup>2</sup> planned a staff day on lines of her own. The idea, roughly, was to invite the whole personnel beginning with the Board President, ask them all to name their interests, and show them the Departments and Branches that they wanted to see.

Preliminary announcements appeared in the June, August, and October issues of the *Staff Association Bulletin*, emphasizing the opportunities offered to each staff member to obtain a fresh perspective on the work of the Library and to become acquainted with colleagues in other Departments and Branches.

An individual invitation signed by the President, with an R.S.V.P. form, both multigraphed on orange paper, went to each member of the staff on October 9; and a general invitation typed on the same orange paper, accompanied by two filled-in, sample R.S.V.P. cards, went up on the Staff Association Bulletin Board at the Main Library and each of the Branches. Following is the four-page folder individual invitation:

AN  
INVITATION  
TO  
OPEN HOUSE  
sponsored  
by the  
STAFF ASSOCIATION  
of the  
NEWARK PUBLIC LIBRARY  
BEATRICE WINSER, LIBRARIAN  
NEWARK, NEW JERSEY  
NOVEMBER 7, 1939

The Staff Association invites you to come to Open House at the Library on Election Day, November 7, 1939, from 10:00 A.M. until 4:00 P.M.

Open House is to be a "get acquainted" affair, so that you may become better acquainted with the Main Library and the Branches, and with your fellow workers.

The notice on the Bulletin Board lists the Departments and Branches to be visited. In order that we may arrange for tours and guides, will you please note on the enclosed sheet the Departments and Branches that you wish to visit, and the approximate time that you would like to spend in each place. If you are interested in learning about a particular phase of the work in a Department, please note that also. If you wish to include a general tour of the Main Library, it will require about one hour.

<sup>1</sup> President of the Staff Association.

<sup>2</sup> Maude E. Fitch, "Staff Day in San Diego," *LIB. JOUR.* 63:103 (Feb. 1, 1938).

Are you willing to be a guide for part of the day, to show the work of your own Department or Branch? Will you please offer your services? We shall need many guides.

Have you an automobile? Will you taxi people around to Branches in the afternoon?

A special feature of Open House is to be the luncheon, to which Miss Winsor has graciously invited the staff. It will be served in the Trustees' Room of the Museum Addition.

We hope that you will come to Open House and help to make it a big success. If you are coming, please fill out the enclosed sheet (see sample on the Bulletin Board), and return it to your Representative by October 17, 1939.

(Signed) CORDELIA CURTIS,  
President, Staff Association,  
Newark Public Library

Here is the general invitation posted on the Bulletin Board:

THE STAFF ASSOCIATION OF THE NEWARK  
PUBLIC LIBRARY

invites each member of the staff to take part in  
OPEN HOUSE

November 7, 1939

Main Library  
10-12:30

Luncheon  
12:30-2

Branches  
2-4

Will you be a guide or a visitor, or both?

What do you wish to see?

On the separate sheet enclosed with the individual invitations, please list the departments, etc., that you wish to visit.

Sample is posted with this notice.

MAIN LIBRARY

Registration Dept.  
Receiving Room  
Extension Dept.  
Repair Dept.  
Switchboard  
Engine Room

Education Dept.  
Order Dept.  
Catalog Dept.  
Print Shop  
Jenkinson Collection  
Office

Lending Department

Fiction  
Reference Section  
P.L. and I.F.  
Maps

N. J. Collection and Documents  
U. S. Documents  
Newspapers and Patents  
Periodicals

MUSEUM ADDITION

Art Dept.  
Children's Room  
Storage

Business Branch  
Clinton  
North End  
Roseville

BRANCHES

Springfield  
Vailsburg  
Van Buren  
Weequahic

On reverse of R.S.V.P. cards sent to the staff members at the eight Branches, the word "Guide," omitted under "Main Library," was inserted under "Branches"; and the word "Branch" was substituted for "Department" under "Signature."

The return of the R.S.V.P.'s showed 121 acceptances and expressions of many diverse interests. In order that



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